

Book Reviews

Ted Underwood. *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013. Pp. 216. US\$35.00.

The title of this monograph seems to promise a slightly different book. An historical analysis of the reasons why period surveys came to dominate the course catalogues of English departments and continue to do so and why the discipline of English studies became organized into scholarly societies based on literary periods would be a book to put on the shelf beside Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Such an analysis remains to be written, however. Instead, Ted Underwood argues, on the basis of the plots of several novels, that a new idea of the value of history to those not blessed with inherited wealth and status was implicit in the literary culture of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. This new role for historical contrast, Underwood believes, inspired the developers of the first degree curricula in English studies and continued to subtend a curriculum based on the period survey until recently.

As far as I can judge, this seems to be an argument about unconscious ideology rather than expressed intention. For example, Underwood suggests that the reason Foucault achieved popularity in literature departments in the 1970s was because "his premises . . . were far from iconoclastic. Professors of literature had been arguing since the early nineteenth century that historical cultivation should be produced, not by continuous narrative, but by contrasting 'periods' that embodied incommensurable social systems" (173). Were either of the sentences intended to capture what people said and thought rather than what they unconsciously believed without either thinking or saying, they would need to be supported, the one with complacent statements about Foucault quoted from a 1970s old guard not feeling particularly challenged by him, the other with quotations from professors of literature "arguing since the early nineteenth century that historical cultivation should be produced, not by continuous narrative," and so on.

I find the absence of an array of evidence of the latter kind particularly unhelpful to Underwood's argument as far as it concerns the apparently perennial appeal of period survey courses to literature professors. Underwood does cite some evidence that F. D. Maurice, who first introduced the period survey into the curriculum of King's College, London in the 1840s, thought that a vivid evocation of an earlier period would give students a sense of connection to the past, but it is oblique evidence since it concerns Maurice's published thoughts on the secondary school education of tradesmen rather

than university education. Thereafter it is simply assumed in silence that all subsequent professors of English shared a single motivation for clinging to the period survey, an ideal of “historical cultivation” Underwood finds originating in fiction from 1790 to 1818. In essence the idea is that “the middle class” (a concept introduced without definition) can substitute the cultivation provided by a vertiginous encounter with a distant past for the aristocracy’s comfortable consciousness of the continuity of inheritance and thus achieve a measure of cultural superiority. Underwood’s readings of the novels are, I think, sometimes convincing on that score. However, the link to undergraduate curriculum structure remains “not proven.” Underwood also argues briefly that the digital humanities offer some kind of way out of periodic thinking, a suggestion that figures more centrally in the text’s jacket copy and blurbs than in the book; how it would work is not made very clear.

Why Literary Periods Mattered has got me thinking about period surveys, though, and I am convinced there is a strong need for the book that Underwood did not write. It should cover the whole of the undergraduate English curriculum in England and America and other English-speaking countries, using archival evidence including course catalogues and course descriptions from all periods, and it should unearth in yellowed departmental meeting minutes the curricular arguments and intentions that have underpinned how we organize our subject. It might look at the literary historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Thomas Warton and John Payne Collier, for the source of period structure, and trace the development of early scholarly societies such as the first Chaucer Society. It will need to deal with the challenges to the period survey that have been part of the curriculum for a very long time, such as the yearlong historical survey course of the *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf model (Thomas Dale, Maurice’s predecessor at King’s, taught a course of this kind, though obviously not reaching Woolf), the single-author course (Maurice’s first course at King’s was on the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*), and the genre course (“The Novel,” “Romantic Poetry”). It will need to take seriously the more recent challenges to the edifice of historical periods: American and Canadian literature, women’s writing, African American writing, postcolonial literature, world literature, creative writing, literary theory, rhetoric, science fiction, and so on. Such a book will do much to illuminate the history of the discipline.

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Works Cited

Graff, Gerald. *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Print.